

Let's be honest – I was nervous, even with three interviews notched on my belt, I had no idea what was to come for this one. The task was to interview a researcher to (as the task description says) “see how research is conducted at the ANU, to appreciate the strengths of different perspectives and to understand how viewpoints are reached and knowledge disseminated” then write this article about what I learnt. It sounds simple enough, but the catch was that it was someone outside my partner's (Arts - English) and my field of knowledge (Science) – the way we see.

Dr Peter Hendriks is a specialist in Japanese linguistics – the study of Japanese language - in contrast to my study of environment sciences and sociology, it was alien to me. I had no idea about how he conducted research, let alone how he perceived the world through linguistics. The only experience I had with languages was struggling through Chinese and French in junior high school and watching Japanese anime. I was sure what I knew was different to his research interests.

My fears were allayed, after a few minutes as I realised that to be a researcher here, there has to be a high level of interest about the subject. And they all start from a similar point – reading critically of other's work or having seen/read/heard “something interesting and it sends you off onto a train of thought to go and investigate it a bit more.” The knowledge created is from communication and inquiry and even after a piece is written, “there's always a process of refinement” – a continual dialogue.

For Dr Hendriks, he's always “enjoyed doing languages, learning languages” and so finds “it interesting to research and to study” and “it interesting to teach”. Different disciplines appeal to different people because of their interest and affinity to that perspective, but the way disciplines see the world is a tool to understanding it. Dr Hendriks' comment is evident of that - “everything I do is viewed through the lens of language” and that “looking at a linguistic point of view, that's just my interest, my primary interest.”

Linguistics is learning the language, about “its structure and how it's used - tells you something about human behaviour; how people behave and how people think.” By analysing changes of the language through history, it is possible to see the history of the country, the people, the culture and how the society has changed. Dr Hendriks uses the example of Singapore and the political tensions surrounding the usage of Singlish as a matter of interest that can be explored using linguistics.

At least, that's what his focus and self-described aptitude is in – “towards the end that deals with language in society”. He says that “linguistics is a broad area to look at, there is psycholinguistics, neuro-linguistics, how it works in the brain, how the vocal chords make the speech, how language is used in society so it goes from being a sociological discipline to being a scientific end.” In a way, linguistics is “halfway between the two extremes.”

Dr Hendriks states “I’m just working because I enjoy it. That’s often the thing that’s true for a lot of us here at the university; we do things that are knowledge; we create knowledge for knowledge’s sake in some ways. It’s not going to have a direct impact on people’s lives.”

Although every discipline may not have a foreseeable practical application, I found it important in creating knowledge and understanding. I learnt a lot about Japanese culture than I ever had dabbling around by myself by reading his short articles defining concerns of the Japanese society today. That in itself is important – the bridging of understanding between each other.